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ABSTRACT

Much is written and spoken about in terms of whole language versus phonics in early reading instruction in the public schools, but the issue between whole language versus phonics probably pertains to what is needed by individual pupils. There are advantages as well as disadvantages for whole language approaches in reading instruction. Needs differ from pupil to pupil. Thus a learner may need little or no phonics to identify unknown words, while another learner may need much phonics to become a proficient reader. If a pupil cannot identify a word, perhaps phonics instruction is needed at that point. Based on needs, the following individual programs of instruction should be adopted for a personalized program of reading instruction: (1) Reading Recovery; (2) basal texts (carefully chosen); (3) library books; (4) Big Books; and (5) experience charts for early primary grade pupils. If the pupil's needs in reading are looked at, this might well minimize the debate on whole language versus phonics. (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

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Whole Language Versus Phonics (What Is Really the Issue?)

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WHOLE LANGUAGE VERSUS PHONICS
(What Is Really the Issue?)

Much is written and spoken about in terms of whole language versus phonics in early reading instruction in the public schools. Advocates of whole language emphasize using Big Books in teaching reading. Thus, all early primary grade pupils in a classroom can see the large print with the accompanying large illustrations. The teacher then introduces the content to be read by discussing the related illustrations with pupils. This provides background information as to what pupils will be reading together from the Big Book. Readiness for reading abstract words is an important factor for success (Ediger, 1997, 1-17).

Pupils listen to the teacher reading aloud content from the Big Book. They follow along with the words as the teacher reads. Next, pupils read the content together with the teacher as learners follow the abstract words sequentially. After several readings aloud, pupils generally have mastered the content in understanding and word identification (Ediger, 1997, 157-171).

Advantages given for whole language approaches in reading instruction are the following:

1. Pupils perceive ideas as wholes and not isolated with phonics and other word attack skills taught in between.
2. Pupils enjoy reading content for ideas gained.
3. Pupils might read more complex literature due to the teacher reading along with pupils as the latter look at the individual words read aloud.

4. Pupils may read real literature containing setting, characterization, and plot. Thus the controlled vocabulary may be minimized (Ediger, 1996, 77-81).

Disadvantages given for the whole language approach in beginning reading instruction are the following:

1. Pupils may not learn word recognition techniques, such as phonics, to unlock unknown words.
2. Even with repeated reading of a selection orally with the teacher, there are no specific approaches taught for pupils to recognize new words.
3. Specific skills may not be taught so that pupils learn independent techniques to identify unknown words.
4. Pupils may not be taught techniques to identify new words, even though this skill is needed by selected pupils.
5. Learners may become too dependent upon the teacher in orally reading a story together (Ediger, 1997, 26-30).

I believe the issue between whole language versus phonics pertains to what is needed by individual pupils. Needs differ from pupil to pupil. Thus a learner may:

1. Need little or no phonics to identify unknown words. Another pupil may need much phonics to become a proficient reader. The pupil should be permitted to reveal to the teacher which skills are needed to become a proficient reader.
2. After diagnosing what a pupil needs, the teacher may then be able to provide more adequately for individual pupils.

3. An adopted reading program needs to be based upon needs of each pupil. Based on needs, the following individual programs of instruction should be adopted for a personalized program of reading instruction:

1. Reading Recovery. This is a one on one program for early primary grade pupils based on diagnosis of problems pertaining to individual pupils.
2. Basal texts (carefully chosen). Basals can benefit many children in reading, providing the teacher is creative in assisting each pupil to do well.
3. Library books. Here pupils may choose their very own books to read sequentially. Conferences with the teacher may be conducted to indicate comprehension and skills.
4. Big Books. These books have content printed large enough for all to see in reading instruction. The content may be read by the teacher as pupils follow the print discourse. Next the teacher and pupil collectively read the content aloud. Rereading may be done as needed. The Big Book approach in reading instruction might well be an excellent way of teaching reading. There is no break between identifying words and reading for understanding. Intermediate grade pupils could also benefit from a Big Book philosophy of reading instruction providing it is used for slow learners, but only if it is necessary (Ediger, 1995, 25-30).
5. Experience charts for early primary grade pupils. Here, pupils have an experience as a readiness for reading activity. For example, the teacher may place items and objects at a center. Pupils with teacher guidance may discuss

the objects. After ample time for a meaningful discussion, the teacher may print on the chalkboard the experiences provided by pupils, after viewing the objects. The ideas presented by pupils might then be recorded in neat, manuscript letters on the chalkboard or on a large screen using the word processor. Learners then read the printed/typed discourse with the teacher pointing to words and phrases as the read aloud activity proceeds. Initial reading may be done by the teacher, orally, to involve pupils. It is important for pupils to look at the sequential words in the cooperative read aloud experience. Content read and words identified become one, not separate activities.

The experience chart philosophy of reading instruction may be emphasized at and on later levels of schooling in the elementary school. There are intermediate grade pupils who do not read well and would benefit from developing an experience chart with teacher/peer assistance in different curriculum areas.

With the use of experience charts, pupils develop a basic sight vocabulary as the contents are read aloud cooperatively. Learners might then say aloud that a word on the chart begins like another word when naming them. Or, words end alike and point to these words (Ediger, 1996, 104-113).

The teacher might also challenge pupils to find words in the chart that begin or end alike. Vowel letters may even be identified by pupils which have the same letter and sound alike or different. Interesting experiences may be emphasized when using induction/deduction in having learners acquire phonic learnings (Ediger, 1998, 11-19).

In Conclusion

The issue in teaching phonics, amount and degree, depends upon what an individual pupil needs. If a pupil cannot identify a word, perhaps phonics instruction is needed at that point. The pupil is learning about tools to unlock unknown words. The need is shown by the pupil. Phonics then is not an end in itself, but is useful to unlock unknown words. There are additional reasons why a pupil may not recognize a word. Thus if a pupil becomes stuck on an unknown word in reading, context clues may be used. Here, the teacher assists the pupil to identify a word by determining that word in relationship to other words in a sentence. Perhaps, a combination of identifying the initial consonant in the unknown word plus use of context clues unlocks the word for a pupil (Ediger, 1997, 162-190).

If needs of a pupil in reading are looked at, this might well minimize greatly the debate on whole language versus phonics. The following may then be minimized:

1. Should phonics be taught or whole language approaches? The dichotomy need not exist here.
2. How much phonics should be taught? The amount of phonics to be taught depends upon what an individual pupil needs (Ediger, 1988, 73-81).
3. Should phonics be taught sequentially? It is important that quality sequences be involved in teaching. Sequence in teaching phonics would emphasize the ordered needs of a pupil to identify the unknown words (Ediger, 1996, 3-24).

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